

Thematic Analysis: Step-by-Step Guide

A practical university lecture on identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of meaning in qualitative data.

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Lecture Overview

This lecture explains thematic analysis as a practical method for identifying, organising, interpreting, and reporting patterns of meaning in qualitative data.



- Key terminology: data item, code, category, theme, pattern, interpretation
- Major approaches: inductive/deductive, semantic/latent, reflexive/codebook/coding reliability
- Detailed step-by-step workflow from familiarisation to reporting
- Practical examples, classroom exercise, knowledge check, and answer key

Learning Objectives

1

Objective 1

Define thematic analysis and explain when it is appropriate.

2

Objective 2

Distinguish codes, categories, themes, and thematic maps.

3

Objective 3

Compare inductive, deductive, semantic, latent, reflexive, codebook, and coding reliability approaches.

4

Objective 4

Apply the six-phase process of thematic analysis to qualitative data.

5

Objective 5

Develop clear themes supported by relevant evidence from the data.

6

Objective 6

Evaluate quality, ethics, and transparency in a thematic analysis report.

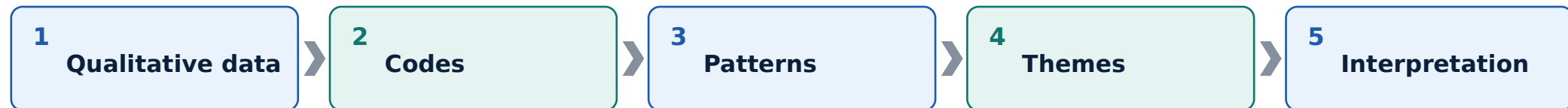
Introduction: Why Thematic Analysis Matters

Thematic analysis is used to make sense of qualitative data by identifying meaningful patterns across interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey responses, documents, diaries, or online posts.

CORE IDEA

TA helps researchers move from raw words to organised meanings that answer a research question.

- Useful across disciplines because it is flexible and accessible.
- Can support exploratory, descriptive, interpretive, or theory-informed studies.
- Requires careful documentation of analytic decisions, not just a list of topics.
- A strong analysis connects themes to participants' meanings and the study context.



Key Definitions

Term	Student-friendly meaning	Example
Data item	One complete unit of data analysed in the study	One interview transcript
Code	A short label for a meaningful segment of data	“fear of judgment”
Category	A grouping of related codes	“barriers to participation”
Theme	A pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept	“seeking safety before speaking”
Thematic map	A visual or written model showing relationships among themes	Theme → subtheme → supporting codes

Background and Academic Context

Thematic analysis has long been part of qualitative inquiry, but it became especially visible after systematic descriptions of how to conduct it in psychology and applied qualitative research.

1

Early coding traditions

Researchers used coding to organise textual data into patterns and categories.

2

Flexible qualitative method

Braun and Clarke described TA as a theoretically flexible method for qualitative analysis.

3

Growing methodological debates

Recent work distinguishes reflexive, codebook, and coding reliability versions of TA.

4

Current emphasis

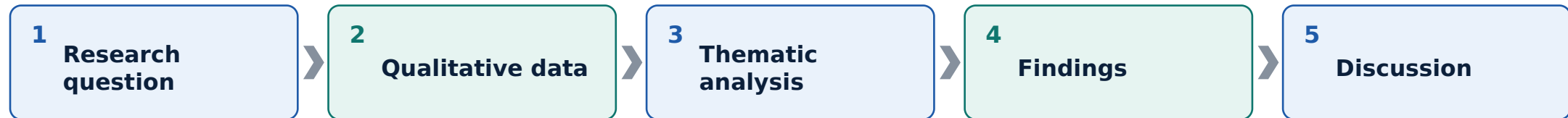
Quality depends on fit between research question, philosophy, analytic approach, and reporting transparency.

LECTURER NOTE

There is no single universal version of thematic analysis. Students must state which approach they are using and why.

Where Thematic Analysis Fits in Research

Thematic analysis is usually used after qualitative data collection and before interpretation, discussion, and reporting. It can be used as a standalone method or within a broader qualitative design.



Design	How TA can be used
Phenomenology	To organise patterns in lived experience while preserving depth of meaning
Case study	To compare themes within and across cases
Program evaluation	To identify perceived strengths, barriers, and implementation issues
Mixed methods	To analyse open-ended responses alongside quantitative results

Main Concepts: From Data to Meaning

A theme is not just a repeated word or broad topic. It is a meaningful pattern that helps answer the research question.



- Coding is an interpretive act: researchers decide what is meaningful.
- Themes should have a central organising concept, not only a descriptive label.
- Good findings use selected data extracts to support analytic claims.

Approach 1: Inductive vs Deductive Analysis

Inductive TA

- Codes and themes are strongly driven by the data.
- Useful when little is known about a topic or when exploring participants' perspectives.
- The researcher avoids forcing data into a pre-existing framework.
- Still influenced by the researcher's background and research question.

Deductive TA

- Codes and themes are guided by theory, literature, or a conceptual framework.
- Useful when testing or applying an existing model to qualitative data.
- Often begins with sensitising concepts or pre-defined coding areas.
- Should remain open to unexpected patterns where appropriate.

Approach 2: Semantic vs Latent Themes

Semantic analysis focuses on explicit meanings. Latent analysis looks beneath the surface to examine assumptions, ideas, and social meanings that shape what participants say.

Aspect	Semantic	Latent
Focus	What participants directly say	Underlying meanings and assumptions
Question	What is being described?	What ideas make this description possible?
Example code	“lack of time”	“productivity pressure”
Interpretive depth	More descriptive	More interpretive

TIP

A study can include both semantic and latent elements, but the report should explain the analytic focus clearly.

Approach 3: Reflexive, Codebook, and Coding Reliability TA

Type	Main idea	Typical use
Reflexive TA	Researcher subjectivity is a resource; themes are actively generated through interpretation.	Exploratory and interpretive studies
Codebook TA	A structured codebook supports consistent coding while allowing qualitative interpretation.	Team projects and applied research
Coding reliability TA	Multiple coders use coding agreement to support reliability.	Projects prioritising coding consistency

- Do not mix assumptions without explanation; each approach has different quality criteria.
- For reflexive TA, inter-coder agreement is usually not treated as the main quality test.
- For codebook and reliability-oriented approaches, coder training and documentation matter.

Data and Research Questions Suitable for TA

Thematic analysis works best when the aim is to understand patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset, rather than to measure frequency alone or build a full formal theory.

Good data sources

- Interview transcripts
- Focus group transcripts
- Open-ended survey responses
- Reflective diaries or journals
- Documents, policies, media texts
- Online forum or social media posts

Good research questions

- How do participants describe an experience?
- What barriers and supports appear across accounts?
- How is a concept understood in a specific context?
- What meanings are attached to a practice or event?
- How do stakeholders interpret a program or policy?

Step-by-Step Process: Six Phases of TA

The classic six-phase structure gives students a clear way to conduct thematic analysis while still allowing iteration and reflexive decision-making.

1

Familiarise with data

Read, listen, and note first impressions.

2

Generate codes

Label meaningful segments.

3

Generate initial themes

Cluster codes into candidate themes.

4

Review themes

Check fit with extracts and dataset.

5

Define and name themes

Clarify the central organising concept.

6

Write up findings

Present a coherent analytic story.

IMPORTANT

The phases are iterative. Researchers often move backward and forward as their understanding deepens.

Step 1: Familiarise Yourself with the Data

Familiarisation means becoming deeply acquainted with the dataset before formal coding. This is where early analytic ideas begin.

- Read transcripts several times and listen to recordings where possible.
- Write brief memos about repeated ideas, contradictions, tone, and context.
- Check transcript accuracy and remove identifying information when needed.
- Notice both expected and surprising patterns linked to the research question.
- Avoid jumping too quickly to final themes.

OUTPUT

Annotated transcripts, initial memos, and a first sense of possible analytic directions.

INSTRUCTOR EXAMPLE

Ask students to read one short interview excerpt and underline sentences that seem meaningful for the research question.

Step 2: Generate Initial Codes

Coding labels meaningful segments of data. Codes can describe actions, feelings, explanations, contradictions, or interpretations relevant to the research question.

Coding actions

- Code line-by-line or segment-by-segment.
- Give each code a clear, concise label.
- Code the same extract more than once if it contains multiple meanings.
- Keep a code list or codebook with short definitions.

Good code qualities

- Specific enough to be meaningful.
- Connected to the research question.
- Flexible enough to revise during analysis.
- Supported by actual data extracts.

Step 3: Generate Initial Themes

After coding, the researcher looks for broader patterns by clustering related codes into candidate themes and subthemes.



THEME TEST

A theme should express a meaningful pattern, not just a collection of similar words.

SUBTHEME TEST

A subtheme should explain a distinct part of the main theme without becoming disconnected from it.

- Use mind maps, tables, sticky notes, or qualitative software to explore relationships.
- Expect early themes to change as the analysis becomes more precise.

Step 4: Review and Refine Themes

Theme review checks whether candidate themes are coherent, distinct, and well-supported by the dataset.

1**Check extracts**

Do coded data extracts within each theme form a coherent pattern?

2**Check dataset**

Do the themes reflect the whole dataset and answer the research question?

3**Check boundaries**

Are themes clearly different from each other, or should some be split or combined?

4**Check story**

Do themes create a coherent analytic narrative rather than unrelated topic headings?

POSSIBLE DECISIONS

Keep • merge • split • rename • discard • return to coding

Step 5: Define and Name Themes

A strong theme has a clear definition, scope, boundaries, and analytic purpose. The name should be concise but meaningful.

Weak theme name	Improved theme name	Why it is better
Communication	Negotiating trust through communication	Shows the central meaning, not just a topic
Stress	Managing invisible pressure	Captures participant experience and interpretation
Technology problems	Technology as support and surveillance	Highlights tension and complexity
Support	Feeling supported only after asking twice	Specific, analytical, and context-sensitive

WRITE A DEFINITION

Step 6: Write Up the Analysis

The final report presents a persuasive analytic story. It should explain what each theme means, support claims with extracts, and connect findings to the research question and literature.

- Introduce the analytic approach and describe the steps taken.
- Present themes in a logical order that builds an argument.
- Use short, carefully selected extracts rather than too many long quotes.
- Interpret the extracts instead of assuming they speak for themselves.
- Explain reflexive decisions, limitations, and implications.

REPORTING FORMULA

Theme claim → evidence from data → interpretation → link to research question/literature

AVOID

A findings section that only lists quotations without explaining the meaning of the pattern.

Practical Examples Across Disciplines

Discipline	Possible topic	Possible themes
Social sciences	Migrants’ experiences of community belonging	Negotiating identity; building informal support networks
Business & management	Employee responses to remote work	Autonomy with isolation; digital visibility pressure
Education	Students’ challenges in online learning	Self-regulation struggles; teacher presence matters
Health sciences	Patients’ experiences of chronic illness care	Feeling unheard; becoming an expert patient
Psychology	Coping with academic stress	Normalising pressure; seeking safe spaces
Information technology	Users’ trust in AI tools	Convenience vs control; uncertainty about accountability

Detailed Research Scenario: Applying TA in a Study

Element	Scenario details
Research topic	Undergraduate students’ experiences of using AI writing tools for coursework
Research problem	Universities need to understand how students interpret benefits, risks, and academic-integrity boundaries.
Research question	How do undergraduate students describe their experiences, concerns, and decision-making when using AI writing tools?
Participants	20–25 undergraduate students from different faculties
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews and optional reflective notes
Data analysis	Reflexive thematic analysis with inductive coding and reflexive memos
Expected interpretation	Themes may show tensions between learning support, dependence, uncertainty, and integrity expectations.

Coding-to-Theme Example

Example research question: How do students experience feedback on academic writing?

Data extract	Initial code	Possible theme
"I only understood what the teacher wanted after the second draft."	feedback becomes clear through revision	Learning feedback through trial and repair
"The comments were detailed, but I felt embarrassed to ask what they meant."	fear of asking for clarification	Emotional risk in academic feedback
"When examples were included, I knew how to improve my next assignment."	examples make feedback actionable	Turning comments into concrete next steps
"I felt the grade mattered more than the comments."	grade overshadows learning	Assessment pressure blocks learning from feedback

LEARNING POINT

The same extract can sometimes support more than one code. Coding decisions depend on the research question.

Comparison Table: TA and Related Methods

Method	Primary aim	Typical output	Key difference from TA
Thematic analysis	Identify patterns of meaning across qualitative data	Themes and thematic narrative	Flexible method; does not require building a formal theory
Content analysis	Categorise content and sometimes count categories	Categories, frequencies, summaries	Often more descriptive or frequency-oriented
Grounded theory	Develop an explanatory theory grounded in data	Conceptual model or theory	More prescriptive procedures and theory-building aim
Discourse analysis	Examine how language constructs social reality	Interpretation of discourse practices	Focuses on language use, power, and social construction

Advantages of Thematic Analysis

- Accessible for students and new qualitative researchers.
- Flexible across theoretical frameworks, disciplines, and data types.
- Useful for summarising both shared patterns and important variations.
- Can produce clear findings that are easy to communicate to academic and applied audiences.
- Works well for exploratory research, needs assessment, policy evaluation, and user research.
- Encourages close engagement with participants' meanings when conducted carefully.

STRENGTH

TA is especially valuable when researchers want to understand how people make sense of experiences, practices, or social situations.

APPLICATION

Results can inform teaching practices, health services, organizational policy, product design, and community programs.

Limitations and Challenges

- Can become superficial if themes are treated as simple topics.
- Findings may be shaped by researcher assumptions if reflexivity is ignored.
- Large datasets can produce too many codes and unclear theme boundaries.
- Poorly selected extracts can weaken the credibility of the analysis.
- A purely descriptive analysis may not answer deeper interpretive questions.
- Quality criteria differ across TA approaches, which can confuse beginning researchers.

COMMON CHALLENGE

Students often name themes after interview questions. Stronger themes explain patterns of meaning across answers.

SOLUTION

Use reflexive memos, theme definitions, thematic maps, and clear reporting of analytic decisions.

Common Mistakes in Student Thematic Analysis

Mistake	Why it is a problem	Better practice
Counting words as themes	Frequency alone does not equal meaning	Interpret patterns in relation to the research question
Using interview questions as themes	Produces a descriptive summary rather than analysis	Generate themes from patterns across data
Too many themes	Findings become fragmented and difficult to follow	Combine, refine, or prioritise stronger themes
Quote dumping	Evidence appears without analysis	Explain what each extract shows
No reflexivity	Researcher role and assumptions are hidden	Include memos and transparent decisions

Best Practices and Quality Checklist

Quality in thematic analysis depends on methodological fit, transparent decision-making, and a clear analytic story supported by data.

- ✓ State the TA approach used and justify it.
- ✓ Align the approach with the research question and theoretical assumptions.
- ✓ Keep an audit trail: memos, code revisions, theme decisions, and examples.
- ✓ Define each theme with a central organising concept.
- ✓ Use extracts that clearly support the analytic claim.
- ✓ Review themes against both coded extracts and the full dataset.
- ✓ Acknowledge researcher positionality and interpretive role.
- ✓ Report enough detail for readers to understand how analysis was conducted.

Ethical Considerations in Thematic Analysis

Ethics continue during analysis and reporting. Researchers must protect participants while representing their meanings carefully and honestly.

1

Privacy and confidentiality

Remove direct identifiers and disguise details that could reveal participants.

2

Informed consent

Use data only in ways participants agreed to, including quotation and secondary use.

3

Responsible interpretation

Avoid overclaiming, stereotyping, or taking extracts out of context.

4

Transparency and integrity

Report analytic decisions honestly and do not present unsupported themes.

SPECIAL CARE

For sensitive topics, consider whether quotes could harm participants even when names are removed.

Classroom Activity: Mini Thematic Analysis

ACTIVITY OBJECTIVE

Practise moving from data extracts to codes and a candidate theme.

MATERIALS

A short paragraph from an interview or three open-ended survey responses.

Instructions

- Individually read the extract and underline meaningful segments.
- Write 3–5 initial codes in the margin.
- In pairs, compare codes and discuss differences.
- Agree on one candidate theme and write a short definition.
- Share the theme with the class and explain the evidence.

Expected outcome

- Students understand that codes can vary.
- Students practise justifying theme development.
- The class sees how interpretation shapes analysis.

Discussion Questions

1

Question 1

Why is a theme more than a repeated topic?

2

Question 2

When would an inductive approach be more useful than a deductive approach?

3

Question 3

How might researcher assumptions influence coding and theme development?

4

Question 4

What makes a data extract suitable evidence for a theme?

5

Question 5

Should all themes appear equally often in the dataset? Why or why not?

6

Question 6

How can students make thematic analysis transparent in a thesis or article?

7

Question 7

What ethical risks can arise when quoting participants?

Knowledge Check

- 1. What is the main purpose of thematic analysis?
- 2. What is the difference between a code and a theme?
- 3. Which phase involves checking themes against the dataset?
- 4. What does inductive thematic analysis mean?
- 5. Why is reflexivity important in thematic analysis?
- 6. Give one example of data that can be analysed using TA.
- 7. What is a common mistake when naming themes?
- 8. What should a good thematic analysis report include?

Answer Key

No.	Suggested answer
1	To identify, analyse, and report meaningful patterns across qualitative data.
2	A code labels a meaningful segment; a theme organises a broader pattern of shared meaning.
3	Phase 4: reviewing themes.
4	Codes and themes are developed primarily from the data rather than imposed from theory.
5	It helps researchers acknowledge how their perspectives shape interpretation.
6	Examples: interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey responses, documents, diaries, online posts.
7	Using broad topics or interview questions as themes instead of analytic theme names.
8	Approach, process, themes, supporting extracts, interpretation, reflexivity, and limitations.

Key Takeaways and Conclusion

- Thematic analysis is a flexible method for analysing qualitative patterns of meaning.
- The six phases guide analysis, but the process is iterative rather than strictly linear.
- Codes are building blocks; themes are broader patterns with a central organising concept.
- Different TA approaches have different assumptions and quality criteria.
- Strong TA requires reflexivity, evidence, transparent documentation, and ethical reporting.

CONCLUSION

When conducted carefully, thematic analysis helps researchers transform qualitative data into clear, credible, and meaningful findings that deepen understanding of human experience and social context.



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